

Give a Break to Americans Giving Birth

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Last month, The [Washington Post](#) ran one of those nauseating stories about all the fabulous maternity benefits women in France get: months of paid leave, government subsidies, free or low-cost day care and so on.

I realize that nations like France, Japan, Sweden and others have reasons for providing generous financial support for new moms — stagnant population growth being one. But after taking my own meager maternity leave, mostly unpaid, hearing about policies like that makes me furious.

I'm ashamed to admit this, but it has taken 40 years and the birth of my own child — five weeks ago, as I write — to awaken me to the fact that the United States is the only industrialized country that doesn't guarantee some sort of paid leave to new mothers.

According to a 2004 study by Jody Heymann, an associate professor at the Harvard School of Public Health, more than 160 countries offer some sort of leave for new mothers, paid by the government. Those that don't include Papua New Guinea, Swaziland, Lesotho — and the United States.

Perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised. But I'd been riding on the blithe assumption that women in America were entitled to three months of maternity leave under the provisions of the Family and Medical Leave Act. I also had some rosy notion that if you didn't qualify for leave under that law, most employers would offer maternity benefits.

I could not have been more wrong. "A lot of women don't understand these policies, and they are very surprised by how little protection they offer," said Debra L. Ness, president of the National Partnership for Women and Families, an advocacy group in Washington.

The Family and Medical Leave Act provides up to 12 weeks of *unpaid* leave for men and women. And even then it covers only people who have worked basically

full time for at least one year at companies with 50 or more employees, said Joan Blades, the co-founder of MomsRising.org, an online organization that promotes family-friendly policies in the workplace. “That means about 40 percent of working women don’t qualify for leave under the F.M.L.A.,” she said.

And don’t count on employers to provide benefits that might bridge those gaps. The number of employees who get fully paid maternity leave of any length dropped to 18 percent in 2005 from 27 percent in 1998, according to the Families and Work Institute, a nonprofit research organization in New York. Only 7 percent of employers offered at least six weeks of maternity leave with at least some pay.

When Jamie Oliver was expecting her first child in 2004, she was appalled by the maternity leave policy at her former job as an urban planner for the city of Portsmouth, Va. “My boss told me I’d be eligible for 12 weeks under the Family and Medical Leave Act — but she didn’t make it clear that I wouldn’t be paid by anyone but me,” Ms. Oliver said.

Ms. Oliver ended up using two weeks of paid vacation time, “and my husband and I covered six more weeks with what we were able to save in the months before I gave birth,” she said. “It was pretty tight.”

I know about tight. Although one of the publications I write for was able to give me a month off with full pay, my husband and I struggled to pull together the extra money we needed to cover my own very brief maternity leave.

But if I’ve learned one thing, it’s that this isn’t about any one woman’s predicament, it’s about the disturbing state of affairs in this country.

In 2002, California passed the Paid Family Leave Act, the first state law that offers most citizens six weeks of paid family leave benefits. Benefits are paid from a common fund to which employees statewide contribute via payroll deductions of less than \$30 a year.

It’s a modest program, and you’d think the other 49 states would have jumped to emulate it. But here it is, four years later, and according to Ms. Ness, while about two dozens states are considering some legislation that might offer families some

paid leave, only Massachusetts is close to passing a law as comprehensive as California's.

"It's embarrassing that a country that talks so much about family values has done so little to support working families," she said.